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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 001174

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM PINR SOCI KISL MY

SUBJECT: NAJIB'S "ISLAMIC STATE" REMARK DRAWS THE IRE OF  
MALAYSIA'S MINORITIES

REF: A. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 2167

- ¶B. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 1975
- ¶C. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 1516
- ¶D. KUALA LUMPUR 949

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Abdul Razak set off a fire storm on July 17 when, in response to a reporter's question, he stated that Malaysia is and has always been an "Islamic state." Malaysia's minorities and opposition parties attacked the DPM's comments as violative of the nation's constitutional history and of the social contract which formed a single nation from Malaysia's Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. The ruling coalition's largest Chinese party, MCA, defended the country's status as a secular nation and declared secularism to be the unequivocal, original intention of the nation's founders. Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Malaysian Bar Council president Ambiga Sreenevasan joined the chorus of protesters decrying Najib's statement. Reeling from the growing backlash among Malaysia's minorities, the Ministry of Internal Security issued a directive two days later requiring all print media to cease publication of any discussion of Malaysia's status as a secular or Islamic state other than statements made by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Opposition party DAP vowed to continue the public discussion and plans to hold a public forum on the issue on July 26. Najib's statement may help the dominant UMNO party woo Malay voters away from the Islamist opposition party PAS; however, it also has opened a political can of worms for the non-Muslim electorate and could be used to attract already disenchanted minority voters away from the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. End Summary.

"We have never been a secular state"

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¶12. (U) Responding to a reporter's question at the July 17 opening of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM)'s two-day international conference on "The Role of Islamic States in a Globalised World," Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak explained that Malaysia is not a secular state, but an Islamic state driven by the fundamentals of Islam. The reporter asked Najib if Malaysia was an Islamic state and to comment on concerns that Malaysia was moving from a secular government to an Islamic state. Najib answered: "Islam is the official religion and Malaysia is an Islamic state, an Islamic state that respects the rights of non-Muslims and we protect them. I want to correct you, that we have never been a secular state. Secular by Western definition means separation of the Islamic principles in the way we govern the country. But we have never abdicated from those principles. Malaysia has always been driven by and adhered to the fundamentals of Islam. So your premise is

wrong."

**13.** (U) Najib's impromptu remarks to reporters followed his delivery of the opening address to the conference, which he explained was in fact the Prime Minister's speech. The address focused on PM Abdullah's familiar themes of the importance of economic development and education in Muslim countries and references to Islam's golden age and status as the world's first "globalizing force." The address did not explicitly address the issue of Malaysia as an Islamic state, though this was the clear implication. The opening ceremony also featured a highly theoretical lecture by IKIM's Director General Syed Al-Attas on "What it Means to be an Islamic State," which argued that following Islamic principles and revelations was more important to the definition than Islamizing otherwise Western governmental institutions.

**14.** (U) Najib's words did little to elaborate on former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's June 2002 remarks to Parliament when he declared that, "Malaysia is not a moderate Islamic state but an Islamic fundamentalist state as its policy is to abide by the fundamental teachings of Islam." Furthermore, Najib's statement does not reflect any current attempt to amend the Constitution or make any new institutional changes in favor of Islam. The Islamic state descriptor, however, goes to the heart of concerns from Malaysia's substantial non-Malay minorities, who make up some 40 percent of the population. Understandably, Najib's contemporary remarks on the eve of Malaysia's 50th anniversary of independence ignited a firestorm of criticism foremost from the Chinese community, but also from other supporters of secular government, such as the Bar Council.

Coalition partner MCA fires back

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**15.** (U) The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysia's largest minority party and founding member of the country's original Alliance uniting Malay, Chinese and Indian political parties, took particular exception to Najib's remarks. Facing immense voter dissatisfaction for cowing to UMNO attacks during last year's UMNO general assembly (ref A), MCA could hardly afford to remain silent. On July 19, MCA's Secretary General Ong Ka Chuan took the lead on countering

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Najib's remarks. Ong delivered public remarks to the press, openly disagreeing with the Deputy Prime Minister. Ong stressed that, contrary to Najib's remarks, Malaysia had always been a secular state and that this was part of the original social contract. Ong quoted the September 27, 1956 Alliance Memorandum to the Reid Commission that stated: "The religion of Malaysia shall be Islam. The observance of this principle shall not impose any disability on non-Muslim nationals professing and practicing their own religion, and shall not imply the State is not a secular state." Ong further cited notes prepared by the Colonial Office dated May 23, 1957 at the London Conference Talks which said: "The members of the Alliance delegation stressed that they had no intention of creating a Muslim theocracy and that Malaya would be a secular state." "This was the unequivocal original intention of UMNO, MCA and MIC," Ong countered.

Bar Council says Najib's father would disagree

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**16.** (U) Malaysian Bar Council president, Ambiga Sreenevasan, an ethnic Indian and leader of Malaysia's mostly non-Malay legal profession, also lambasted the DPM's comments. In a July 18 written statement to the press, she too quoted Malaysia's founding fathers and even cited a report from the independence sub-committee chaired by the current DPM's own father, Abdul Razak, recognizing that Malaysia would be a secular state. "It is time," Sreenevasan wrote, "that the

proposition that Malaysia is not secular, (which is a rewriting of the Constitution), be put to rest once and for all and that there is due recognition and reaffirmation of the clear legal and constitutional position that Malaysia is, and has always been, a secular State."

Anwar joins attack on Najib

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¶17. (U) Former Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the opposition People's Justice Party, Anwar Ibrahim, also joined in the attacks on Najib's declaration. Anwar lamented that Najib's "latest pronouncement about Malaysia being an Islamic state shows his dismal ignorance of what such a state really means. In an attempt to pander to communal and religious sentiments, Najib has chosen to blatantly disregard the provisions of the Constitution which, while stating that Islam is the religion of the Federation, safeguards the sanctity of other religions without discrimination one from the other."

Media clampdown

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¶18. (SBU) Responding in typical fashion (see refs A and C) to widespread criticism against the Government, and to hot-button racial and religious issues, the Ministry of Internal Security (MIS) issued an order on July 19 to all mainstream media banning any further discussion of the subject. Malaysiakini, the country's leading, independent, online news portal, quoted a senior MIS official: "Yes, we have given the directive to all mainstream newspapers. Islam is a sensitive issue. They cannot publish any news on whether the country is secular or Islam (sic)... Reaction from political parties and the public cannot be published, especially negative reactions." The officer told Malaysiakini that MIS is afraid that allowing such discussions would cause "tension." However, the MIS official said newspapers can still publish statements from the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on the country being an Islamic state.

DAP seeks to capitalize on Chinese reaction

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¶19. (SBU) The country's largest opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), has already begun to capitalize on Najib's racially divisive statements as a rallying cry for their campaign and are seeking to attract even more voters away from MCA and Gerakan. Despite, and perhaps due to, the Ministry of Internal Security's ban on print media, DAP has already announced a public forum to discuss Malaysia's standing as a secular country to be held on July 26 at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Kuala Lumpur.

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Comment

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¶10. (C) Najib's remarks come on the heels of the court decision in the Lina Joy apostasy case, which reassured Muslim conservatives and disappointed non-Muslim minorities (ref D). Whether planned or not, Najib's statement (like the Lina Joy decision) will play well among the constituents of the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and allow UMNO to solidify its Islamic credentials among Malaysia's Malay/Muslim majority. These and other issues set UMNO and the ruling government out as the defender of Islam; its increasingly privileged position in Malaysian society continues to polarize the country's ethnic communities. Divisive religious and ethnic issues have been growing in the Malaysian electorate. The 2006 Sarawak state elections, along with several by-elections earlier this year, reflected great voter dissatisfaction among Malaysia's Chinese minority (ref B). Following UMNO's annual general meeting last year,

Malaysia's dominant Chinese political parties, MCA and Gerakan, found themselves facing even greater voter apathy and a growing dissatisfaction within their own communities. While Najib's comments certainly strengthen his position among the Malays, they unquestionably undermine the standing of BN's minority parties in their own communities and threaten to weaken Chinese voices within the ruling government. Chinese voters, however, face poor options. The alternative to UMNO as a Malay political partner is the unabashedly Islamist opposition party PAS, known for its advocacy of a much more conservative and far-reaching version of an Islamic state.

¶11. (C) The Government's heavy-handed order to cease media discussion of this "sensitive issue" came as no surprise to anyone in Malaysia. Although press freedom expanded at the margins following Mahathir's departure, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's 2004 campaign promises to foster freedom of the press never came to full fruition. Quashing media discussion of religious and ethnic divisions has remained a mainstay of UMNO political control (ref A). Despite threats to the print media, these "sensitive" discussions continue on the internet, and the chasm between Malaysia's ethnic and religious groups grows with each passing event.

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